Oscar Koch

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In World War II, the U.S. and the allies won the intelligence war against both Germany and Japan. In a war of unprecedented technological change and the proliferation of intelligence collecting tools, the art of intelligence threw off the cloak of esoteric guesswork and accepted the mantle of an increasingly reliable science. It had been able to provide hard information about enemy capabilities to World War II commanders, even if many of them paid it little attention. But with the postwar demobilization, there was the distinct danger that much that had been learned in the arena of combat would evaporate along with the veterans returning to civilian life. To forestall that possibility, a small cadre of intelligence officers determined to turn the lessons of the war into training plans and doctrine. These too few men, with their collective wartime experiences, wound up at Fort Riley, Kansas. Carefully selected for their specialized intelligence assignments during the war, they were sent to the Intelligence Department of the Army Ground School, the army's only remaining intelligence training school. The first head of that department in 1946 was Oscar Koch.

They chose the right man for the job of teaching a new generation of intelligence officers. No intelligence officer in the European Theater of Operations had been more effective or astute than Oscar Koch. He began his military career in the Wisconsin Light Horse Squadron in 1915. As an eighteen-year-old he patrolled the border with Mexico during the Punitive Expedition. By the time he was 21 he was commissioned a second lieutenant and serving in France during World War I. He commanded Wisconsin's first National Guard unit and taught at the Cavalry School at Fort Riley. It was at that post that he first met George S. Patton in the 1930s. He was assigned to the staff of the 2d Armored Division upon its organization in 1940. Patton had been named as its commander.

In 1942 while they were conducting training exercises at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Patton called Koch outside after a dinner party. He asked him if he wanted to get in on the fighting in Europe. Koch jumped at the chance. He thought that at his age of 45 he would never be allowed in combat. He first served as chief of staff of Task Force Blackstone during the Patton invasion of French Morocco. When Patton was named commander of the II Corps in March 1943, he selected Koch as his G2, a post he would hold for the entire war, following Patton to the II Corps and I Armor Corps in the North African campaigns, in the U.S. Seventh Army for the invasion of Sicily, and then with the Third Army as it fought across France and Germany.

In his first assignment with Patton's Western Task Force, Koch was learning lessons that would put him in good stead for the rest of the war. He observed:

> Without intelligence, the commander is blind. Only through the reasoned application of information supplied by intelligence is he able to make sound tactical decisions. Particularly at the high echelons of command, the commander must know everything intelligence can determine about the country in which he is to engage the enemy. He must know its resources, natural and acquired; the details of its political structure; its economy; the attitudes of its people, their ideologies and characteristics; its climate, and its transportation and communications systems. In short, the commander must know that country as well as he does his own--or better.
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> …The initial success of Patton's Western Task Force reflected the planning and foresight of those at the higher echelons whose peacetime specialities had taken them well beyond the scope

of the previously neglected and decadent state of "combat intelligence." Casualties had been held to a minimum, enemy soldiers had been captured en route to their posts. Even so, we learned lessons in that brief operation which could save countless lives among American and Allied troops in the long, hard-fought campaigns ahead. It was obvious to me that commanders and their staffs at all levels needed greater orientation and training in the proper use of intelligence specialists, attached for specific duties. A gigantic step had been taken in that direction, however; an intelligence consciousness was developing.[1]

Writing about the man who would turn to him for crucial advice for the next four years of fighting, Koch said, "refreshingly, intelligence was viewed as crucial in the Patton commands and was treated accordingly."[2] Patton was one of the few commanders of World War II that welcomed and relied upon intelligence, especially the Ultra intercepts. He was fortunate to have Oscar Koch as his G2, a prudent and energetic intelligence officer, just as Koch was blessed to have a commander who encouraged good intelligence work. Patton's belief in the worth of intelligence had the effect of inspiring his G2 section to greater efforts in the realization that their work was appreciated. It was an intelligence officer/commander dynamic that would serve as a model for the doctrine of "Commanders Drive Intelligence."

In his study of World War II commanders and their attitudes toward intelligence, Harold C. Deutsch concluded that Patton ranked "among the most enthusiastic and successful users of intelligence among the Allied leaders, especially with respect to Ultra."[3] But like all of the other commanders, he had an initial distrust of Ultra intelligence. It sounded too good to be true. When he was briefed in Algiers by a Special Security Officer about the ability of the allies to read the enemy's high-level signals, he just responded, "You know, young man, I think you had better tell all this to my intelligence staff. I do not go much for this sort of thing. You see, I just like fighting." By the time he reached France, he was a convert, fully appreciating the value of the Ultra intercepts.

Koch, too, who would become "one of the most astute and appreciative users of Ultra," was initially sceptical. His experience with British signal intelligence liaison in earlier campaigns in Africa and Italy had not been one to inspire confidence, so his reception of Major Melvin Helfers, the Third Army Special Security Officer, was cool. He tasked him with preparing single page reports on new developments and occasionally stopped by his tent to look over the raw materials. It was not until early August when an Ultra intercept showed a German advance on Avranches, via Mortain, that Koch's interest picked up. He briefed Patton on the move of five German armor divisions toward Mortain and the Third Army commander immediately countered by putting the 35th Division in a blocking position. It resulted in an overwhelming victory at Mortain, blunting the German counter thrust to the allied breakout in the Ardennes. It also led to the embrace of Major Helfers as key member of the staff. He was required to present daily briefings which were directly responsible for many of Patton's tactical decisions.

The Battle of the Bulge is commonly thought of as a model of American intelligence nonfeasance. It was a time when most commanders believed the German army was in disarray and reeling before the advancing allied forces. A SHAEF Intelligence Summary issued on the day after the liberation of Paris, 26 August 1944, reflected the optimism of the allied leaders. "Two and a half months of bitter fighting…have brought the end of the war in Europe within sight, almost within reach. The strength of the German Armies in the West has been shattered. Paris belongs to France again, and the Allied armies are streaming towards the frontiers of the Reich."[4]

One voice was less willing to count the Germans out. It was the collective voice of Oscar Koch's Third Army G2 Section. In an assessment written on 28 August, Koch warned,

> Despite the crippling factors of shattered communications, disorganization and tremendous losses in personnel and equipment, the enemy nevertheless has been able to maintain a sufficiently cohesive front to exercise an overall control of his tactical situation. His withdrawal, though continuing, has not been a rout or mass collapse. Numerous new identifications in contact in recent days have demonstrated clearly that, despite the enormous difficulties under which he is operating, the enemy is still capable of bringing new elements into the battle area and transferring some from other fronts. …barring internal upheaval in the homeland and the remoter possibility of insurrection within the Wehrmacht, it can be expected that the German armies will continue to fight until destroyed or captured.[5]

It is a paragraph that is quotable not only for the wisdom of its prediction but for the lucidity of its prose. It is clear that Koch served his commander well.

About Koch's successful evaluation of the enemy situation, one historian speculated that perhaps Koch was "lucky in his boss."[6] While that is true, it does not go far enough to explain why Koch's estimates were consistently more accurate than his colleagues at the army group and theater level. Like his commander, Koch was in the habit of taking a wider view of the fighting, rather than concentrating on the enemy in front of the Third Army's path of advance. This enabled him to reach different conclusions about German intentions. He was concerned about the German dispositions in the Ardennes, believed by the rest of the allies to be a quiet zone where German units were rotated for rest. Only Koch thought the Germans were building up in the area. On 9 December 1944 he briefed his boss about the 13 divisions the Germans had taken out of the line elsewhere and moved to the Ardennes, concluding that the enemy was planning an operation in that area. As a result, Patton was the only Allied commander who planned for such an eventuality.

On 10 December Koch wrote that "although the Allied offensive is destroying weekly a number of German divisions, nevertheless the enemy has been able to maintain a coherent front without drawing on the full of his infantry and armored reserves, thereby giving him the capability to mount a spoiling offensive in an effort to unhinge the Allied assault on 'Festung Deutschland.'"[7] But Koch again found himself in the minority. The heavy casualties suffered by the Germans led other G2s to conclude the enemy was unable to mount any offensive. Brig. Gen. Eddie Sibert, G2 for 12th Army Group, in a 12 December Weekly Intelligence Summary, wrote: "It is now certain that attrition is steadily sapping away the strength of the German forces on the Western Front and that the crust of defenses is thinner, more brittle, and more vulnerable than it appears in the south and in the north, the breaking point may develop suddenly and without warning."[8]

Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery's G2 at 21st Army Group in Brussels, Brigadier E. T. Williams, also felt the Germans were in "a bad way." He opined, "He has had a tremendous battering and has lost heavily in men and equipment.… [He is] fighting a defensive campaign on all fronts; his situation is such that he cannot stage a major offensive operation!"[9] The lesson from the intelligence breakdown prior to the German offensive in the Ardennes was not a new one. It was another instance of ignoring clear signals because they upset the brighter picture more readily embraced by the allied commanders. It was a case of wishful thinking, since the German units were being pulled out of the line to take part in a counteroffensive in the Ardennes.

By 18 December Koch had counted five Panzer divisions commit-

ted in the First Army zone, along with seven new infantry divisions. For Koch the fog of war had lifted. He wrote, "The enemy offensive is designed to disrupt the Allied winter drive to smash German military forces in the West; the enemy has committed the bulk of his Panzer and infantry reserves in the West, but still has available a group of divisions to exploit the gains made in the Eifel area; the Third and Seventh Armies' threat to the Siegfried Line continues an undiminished danger to the enemy which he may attempt to dissipate by making a thrust in the north sector of the United States XX Corps zone."[10]

In a conversation after the war between Maj. Gen. Kenneth Strong, Eisenhower's British intelligence officer, and Koch, Strong asked "How did we miss the Bulge?"

Koch replied, "We didn't," and related the information he had reported at the time. Strong expressed regret that he did not have the time to visit lower headquarters because, if he had, he might have learned more immediate information about the enemy situation.

Koch made the point in his 1971 book that Third Army G2 shared all of its information with higher, lower and lateral headquarters. Likewise, Third Army received reports from other headquarters which they used in the development of their own information.

Even though the enemy buildup was not on the Third Army front, it was of vital importance to our mission. It was a hard and fast rule in Patton commands that we overlap other areas sufficiently, intelligence-wise, to protect our flanks. While we had no reason to challenge the competence of intelligence received from other quarters, we were simply minding our own business in analyzing and interpreting such reports in the light of our own needs. It was in such analysis and intepretation, apparently, that we differed with other headquarters.

The final outcome of the Battle of the Bulge notwithstanding, the situation was saved by the Allied response *after* the German attack and not by preparations made before. Third Army intelligence reports had accurately adjudged the enemy capabilities and predicted the coming course of events. Had other, higher headquarters taken the precautionary steps that Patton took, the edge of the fanatic Nazi thrust might have been dulled. It could have been von Rundstedt who was taken by surprise as the Allies sprung the trap.

Certainly there was an intelligence faulure preceding the Battle of the Bulge. But it was not the total blindness to the enemy buildup which is indicated in prevailing accounts of that historic clash. "Intelligence failure" connotes a breakdown in the intelligence service's collection techniques. The Allied failure leading to the tragedy of the Bulge was in evaluation and application of the intelligence information at hand.[11]

He is credited by the Military Intelligence Hall of Fame for introducing the concept of fully integrated, all-source intelligence techniques. This helped the Third Army's commanders make quicker combat decisions than ever before possible and assisted staff planning at all levels with unprecedented confidence. Many of the techniques he developed would become standard procedures well into the 1990s. Koch's G-2 section continuously conducted intelligence preparation of the battlefield. It studied terrain, enemy, disposition, capabilities and weather. It wargamed plans at least two operations ahead of the one being executed. Koch, more than any modern soldier, successfully demonstrated the proper place of intelligence in the decision-making process. He developed a G-2 planning cycle that detailed all activities, duties and responsibilities of the section. The cycle showed in detail how to plan all intelligence activities in joint operations. This blueprint for combat intelligence planning, adaptable to units of almost any size, set daily goals during a prescribed

period before a major offensive. It also provided a checklist by which the intelligence staff could measure its progress.[12]

A World War II subordinate in the Third Army G2 shop, Colonel Richard S. Allen, described Koch in his 1947 history *Lucky Forward*: Brilliant, quiet-spoken, and hard-working, Koch was commissioned in the Regular Cavalry from the Wisconsin National Guard after overseas service in World War I. He translated a number of important foreign military volumes and wrote a notable study on the Army's first armored-car maneuvers. Patton brought him to the 2d Armored Division soon after the illustrious "Hell on Wheels" was organized, and took him to Africa as Chief of Staff of one of the Task Forces. Later he made him his G2. Koch was the spark plug of Hq Third Army. Because of his exceptional abilities, unfailing effectiveness, and the wide range of G2 activities, he was constantly being tossed the ball. Patton and the Chief of Staff were always assigning him tasks outside his Sectional duties. Koch is the greatest G2 in the U.S. Army. His record is without equal in every phase of Intelligence. …Army Ground Forces made him head of the Intelligence department of the new Ground General School at Fort Riley—an even greater tribute to Army Ground Forces intelligence than to Koch. Meanwhile, far lesser and less experienced men, who knew little about Intelligence but a lot about handling a teacup, got the star-spangled G2 posts. From the War Department to Group, there wasn't a G2 who could hold a candle to Koch. Most of them rattled around in their jobs as futilely as buckshot in a pail. Scholarly and self-effacing, he [was not] politically and socially minded. In the Army and Navy, as in other spheres, agility in these lines goes a long way in garnering brass. Koch preferred to stand on his merits. But while extensively employed and appreciated, they were not so fully rewarded.[13]

In 1946 Koch was chosen to head up the Intelligence Department in the Ground Forces School at Fort Riley and to serve as the Deputy Commandant of the school. He was director of intelligence for the high commissioner and commanding general of the U.S. forces in Austria. In the Korean War he finished his career as commander of the 25th Infantry Division. He retired in 1954 and began the research on his book, *G2: Intelligence for Patton*, which he completed with the help of Robert G. Hays in 1970, just before his death on 16 May. His book was considered by many intelligence professionals to be a textbook for successful military intelligence work.

Koch, like many intelligence professionals before him, wanted to answer the question "What kind of man makes a good intelligence officer?" Like everybody in military service, they came from a wide variety of backgrounds and educational levels. But Koch found that they had a lot in common.

…Each possessed imagination, initiative, and mental flexibility. Each was a willing worker, a methodical detail man and organizer. Each was able to work quietly and in harmony with others; none was a worrier, unable to relax. Everyone got along well with and could supervise others, and was able to think on his feet and express himself well.[14]

The qualities he came to look for when selecting someone for his staff were recognized early.

Imagination, we soon learned, was essential if the intelligence officer were to be able to put himself into the place of the enemy; initiative, if he were to strive constantly to develop new ideas, methods, and techniques and apply them to one of the oldest professions. He had to be a willing worker; intelligence knows no hours. He had to be able to adjust and re-adjust his thinking to meet new and ever-changing situations. He had to have that infinite capacity for painstaking details, for he would find intelligence basically a summary of detail. The intelligence estimate, for example, would be the

product of a myriad of details gathered and put into position, one with or against the other, omissions inviting false impressions.

The intelligence officer had to have organizational ability to derive maximum utilization of the personnel and intelligence tools available. He had to plan ahead, setting reasonable and objective completion times for specific projects. To be able to work quietly and harmoniously with others was an absolute necessity because his work usually would be done under the least favorable working conditions possible by men working as a team. Yet, the combat intelligence officer invariably found himself sooner or later in a supervisory position, and he had to be able to handle men.

…Finally, the G2 team member had to be able to think on his feet. At any time he might be called upon to express his views. Whether before his peers or in the presence of high rank, he must do so with precise accuracy and with the courage of his convictions.[15]

In a chapter entitled "Intelligence in Combat," Koch described in great detail the duties and organization of the G2 section in the second world war. The intelligence officer was responsible for furnishing the Essential Elements of Information that his commander required. He had "to supply his commander with the information necessary to make the command decisions critical to fulfillment of the mission. From there on, however, the intelligence business was his alone. He and his staff would be charged with finding the right sources of information, sorting bits and pieces together until an overall picture developed, then evaluating and interpreting the information at hand in light of other known facts and seeing that the resulting intelligence reached the right people."[16] In his description of the ongoing planning, collecting, processing, production and dissemination of intelligence, he anticipated the intelligence cycle that would be delineated in manuals of 50 years hence.

He saved his most ringing advice for last, adding a four-page epilogue on "Command Support." It was the support of the commander that Koch thought most important in aiding the intelligence officer in his work. Command support was manifested in a mutual confidence. The intelligence man "must be confident that the results of his efforts will be respected by his commander, both in terms of interest and attitude and in the degree of utilization of the end product so painstakingly produced. The commander, on the other hand, must be confident that his intelligence chief's work merits such respect. If either's confidence fails, command support is nonexistent. With command support, G2 will tackle any job. Without it, he performs a purposeless task, merely going through a series of staff exercises. In that case, both he and the commander are losers."[17] [18]

In George Patton, Koch had a commander who expressed his confidence in his intelligence section more than any other allied commander in the European theater. He did so by basing his tactical decisions and operational plans on the information provided by his G2. He knew that intelligence was not guesswork but relied on difficult, time-consuming, and painstaking work. In Oscar Koch, Patton had an intelligence officer who embodied all of the attributes of the model G2, one who dedicated the final years of his life to setting down on paper what future intelligence soldiers would need to know.

Notes

1. Koch, Oscar W., and Hays, Robert G., *G2: Intelligence for Patton*, Whitmore Publishing Company, Philadelphia, 1971, pp. 9-10.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

3. Deutsch, Harold C., "Commanding Generals and the Uses of Intelligence," in Handel, Michael I., *Leaders and Intelligence*, Frank Cass, London, 1989, pp. 194-259.

4. Weigley, Russell F., *Eisenhower's Lieutenants: The Campaign of France and Germany 1944-1945*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Vol I, p. 374.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 377-8.

6. Deutsch, p. 254.

7. Quoted in Deutsch, p. 250.

8. Bradley, Omar N., and Blair, Clay, *A General's Life: An Autobiography*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1985, pp. 349-50.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 340-50.

10. Koch, p. 102.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

12. This paragraph is taken from a biography prepared by the Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence, Hall of Fame action office, U.S. Army Intelligence Center and Fort Huachuca, Fort Huachuca, AZ.

13. Allen, Robert S., *Lucky Forward: The History of General George Patton's Third Army*, Vanguard Press, New York, 1947.

14. Koch, pp. 121-3.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 122-3.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

18. The allies too were recording their lessons. Donald McLachlan, a veteran of British Naval Intelligence in World War II, offered these thirteen precepts culled from his experience:

1. Fighting commanders, technical experts, and political leaders are liable to ignore, underrate, or even despise intelligence. Obsession and bias often begin at the top.
2. Intelligence for the fighting services should be directed as far as possible for civilians.
3. Intelligence is the voice of conscience to a staff. Wishful thinking is the original sin of men of power.
4. Intelligence judgments must be kept constantly under review and revision. Nothing must be taken for granted either in premises or deduction.
5. Intelligence departments must be fully informed about operations and plans, but operations and plans must not be dominated by the facts and views of intelligence. Intelligence is the servant and not the master.
6. Reliance on one source is dangerous; the more reliable and comprehensive the source, the greater the dangers.
7. One's communications are always in danger; the enemy is always listening in, even if he cannot understand. Intelligence has a high responsibility for security.
8. The inteligence worker must be prepared for villainy; integrity in the handling of facts has to be reconciled with the unethical way they have been collected.
9. Intelligence is ineffective without showmanship in the presentation and argument.
10. The boss, whoever he is, cannot know best and should not claim that he does.
11. Intelligence is indivisible. In its wartime practice the divisions imposed by separate services and departments broke down.
12. Excessive secrecy can make intelligence ineffective.
13. Intelligence is produced from files but by people. They require recognition, continuity and tradition, like a ship or a regiment.

[McLachlan, Donald, *Room 39: A Study in Naval Intelligence*, Athenium, New York, 1968.